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ABSTRACT

A study examined cultural factors affecting the participation of black people in vocational education. Analysis of the way in which black people process information suggests that, unlike white people, blacks tend to view things in their environment in their entirety rather than in isolated parts. Furthermore, they seem to prefer intuitive rather than deductive or inductive reasoning and tend to approximate the concepts of space, number, and time rather than to aim at exactness or complete accuracy. Finally, they prefer to respond to people stimuli rather than nonsocial stimuli and tend to rely on nonverbal as well as verbal communication. Examination of the status of black participation in vocational education reveals that the largest share of black enrollment is in consumer and homemaking and home economics education while the smallest percentage is in agricultural and technical areas. Thus, black people are overrepresented in the lowest quality programs and in courses that equip them with few labor market skills leading to low-wage, low-demand jobs. If vocational teachers are to encourage increased black participation in vocational education, they must first develop more realistic attitudes toward black culture and ethnic diversity. In addition, they must design curricula and select instructional materials to include an emphasis on black culture and role models. (MN)

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# CULTURAL FACTORS AFFECTING THE PARTICIPATION OF BLACKS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

by

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the participation of Black Americans in vocational and technical education programs. Specifically, it will examine the cultural patterns that influence and shape present-day life styles of Blacks in the American society. The paper will also examine the need for vocational teachers to have exposure to multicultural education.

Finally, the paper concludes by depicting cultural and value experiences shared by Blacks and their implications for the vocational education profession.

## INTRODUCTION

The most important issue facing the participation of black Americans today in the broad field of vocational and technical education is the task of promoting the success of Black youth. Today, despite that more Black Americans than ever before are participating in and completing vocational education programs at the secondary, post-secondary and adult levels, and more Blacks are securing jobs requiring vocational and technical education preparation, if the statistics and situation are examined closely, one notes this increase has not been of sufficient magnitude to reduce the unequal proportion of Blacks found in low paying service oriented vocational programs nor the reported high incidence of Black youths "dropping out."

Among the factors cited (e.g., Sheppard and Moody, 1976) as affecting the performance and participation of Blacks in vocational education programs are

(1) Blacks perception of certain occupations as being "unworthy," "demeaning," or something for Blacks only;

(2) historical and contemporary forms of discrimination and socio-economic deprivation;

(3) cultural and value differences;

(4) misconceptions and prejudices on the part of vocational education decision makers, and

(5) attitudes of Blacks toward vocational education.

This paper will examine factor number three (cultural and value differences) as a significant variable influencing the participation and performance of Black Americans in vocational education programs and will conclude by discussing implications for the design and evaluation of these programs. To provide an appropriate background for the discussion of Black participation

in vocational education, brief attention will be devoted to the concept of multicultural education/cultural pluralism and cultural foundations of the Black experience.

## MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: WHAT IS IT?

## WHY DO VOCATIONAL TEACHERS NEED IT?

The multicultural heritage of the American people is a reality in our country and should be a major goal of our entire educational system. American society is composed of a wide variety of cultural communities each with its own characteristic lifestyle, value system and all the other components that make up what we call "culture." Multicultural education in our schools should reflect and respect these cultural diversities. Multicultural education should not only help students gain the skills and perceptions needed to function effectively within their own culture, but other ethnic cultures as well as the common culture (Sheppard, 1981).

As an educational concept, multicultural education is defined in many ways. The federal government states that multicultural education is the (Howsam, et.al., 1976):

a. knowldege of cultures and of subcultures, with special emphasis on those minority groups which are pervasively represented in American communities;

b. awareness of how specific cultures and learning situations, and skill is sensitizing professional behavior to learners;

c. transformation of personal prejudices, so that negative biases are minimized, and positive appreciation of minority students increases;

d. adjustments in curricula to implement the transition from the concept of "melting pot" to cultural pluralism."

This defintion focuses on multicultural education being incorporated in schools where the institutional norms recognize and are sensitive to the cultural or ethnic diversity of our country. The total school progam shares the responsibility for implementing multicultural concepts within their curriculum.

SPECIAL NOTE: As used in this paper the terms "multi-cultural education," "cultural pluralism," "multi-ethnic education," and "ethnic diversity" will have the same meaning and context.

The first reason vocational teachers need training in multicultural education is because America is a culturally pluralistic society. Cultural and ethnic diversity in the U.S. is a fact of life. Multicultural education is a positive response to the culturally pluralistic nature of the U.S. The presence of ethnic and cultural diversity in America should be recognized as a strength, not a weakness, as various ethnic and cultural groups contribute to the national culture while maintaining their distinct identity. When translated into the curriculum and teachers' attitudes, training in multi-cultural education will help teachers recognize, accept and allow people from all ethnic and cultural groups to maintain and be proud of their cultural background. It emphasizes differences as positive, not negative. Multi-cultural education is designed to train teachers to function more skillfully in a culturally pluralistic America.

The second reason teachers need training in multicultural education is beacuse it is very likely they will practice their professional skills in classrooms populated by pupils from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. There is an ever-increasing likelihood that teachers in every section of the country will have children from culturally diverse groups in their classrooms.

It is important, therefore, that teachers understand and work for cultural pluralism. To be successful, the multicultural approach to education depends upon the teacher's understanding of different ethnic cultures, upon his or her attitudes toward differences in ethnic backgrounds, and ability to develop teaching strategies appropriate for a multicultural classroom. It is essential that the teacher recognize the different linguistic backgrounds of children such as the Chinese, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Haitians who come from families in which English is not the native tongue.

In familiarizing oneself with another ethnic culture, preferable through first-hand experience in living with, or at least working with, people from that ethnic group, the teacher should learn their values, customs, achievements, aspirations and frustrations and, where possible, their language. She/he can see that such categories as Oriental and Native American are much too inexact because they include culturally diverse groups. For example, the term oriental may ignore the wide cultural differences among the Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese and Koreans, and most textbooks refer to Native Americans as though all the tribes had the same language and values. From these studies, one should learn a general approach to understanding other cultures since no college curriculum can include the study of all the cultures a vocational teacher, nor any other teacher, is likely to meet in the future.

## CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

Do Blacks process information from the environment differently than do other groups? Based on his observations of Black Americans, Hilliard (1976) would answer affirmatively. He suggests that Black people (a) tend to view things in their environment in entirety rather than in isolated parts, (b)

seem to prefer intuitive rather than deductive or inductive reasoning, (c) tend to approximate concepts of space, number, and time rather than aiming at exactness or complete accuracy, (d) prefer to attend to people stimuli rather than nonsocial of object stimuli, and (e) tend to rely on nonverbal as well as verbal communication. The reason for these differences is found within the Black culture (Shade, 1982).

Culture is a rather abstract term but genrally is defined as the rules members of a particular group use to govern the interaction with each other and the environment. Berry (1976) considers culture to be a way of life or a learned pattern of behavior which is unique to a group of people. Cohen (1974) defines it as a process of adaptation. The general view of Black American culture is that it is a distinct pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting, which has developed as a way of adapting to color discimination. Charles Keil (1966) suggests that this pattern is an "experiental wisdom" which provides Black Americans a unique outlook on life or world view.

All groups of people seem to have a *Weltanschauung* or world view that serves as the philosophical underpinnings of their behavior (Shade, 1982).

The Black American *Weltanschauung* is that the people within one's environment should be approached with caution, wariness, and a sense of distrust. This idea is vital to the survival of a group who live in a society with dislikes predicated on skin color. It is, as Perkins (1975) points out, a way of insuring that the individual does not become a "victim." Despite a wealth of sociological, anthropological, and historical data to the contrary, some people still believe (1) that Black Americans are "just Americans" without a discernable past beyond their arrival upon the American scene as slaves; and (2) that Blacks have no values and life-styles other than those they share with the "common American culture."

Many people refuse to acknowledge the fact that Blacks in the United States and in the other Americas share some common-core historical experiences and cultural patterns that continue to shape present-day life-styles. Still others forget that, in spite of overwhelming barriers and long standing discriminatory practices, Blacks have contributed to all phases of America's growth and development. Simultaneously, they have reshaped the heritages of their African origins and their peculiar American experiences in the intervening years between 1619 and the present into a distinctive life-style.

As has been the case with many other immigrants to America, Blacks did not completely leave their African origins behind when they departed from their homeland. Rather, they carried the memory and imprint of their heritage across successive generations in their songs, socialization processes, social behaviors, institutions, and value systems.

Black presence and influence in American culture have been consistent and persistent over the years. Whether in art, music, politics, science, economics, or literature; whether in colonial or contemporary times; whether in servitude or in freedom, whether in times of peace or war; whether intellectually, aesthetically or physically, Blacks have been influential in shaping American life and culture. The gifts of Black folk are unique in that their particular character has been shaped, sometimes subtly and sometimes overtly, by perspectives and experiences resulting from the interplay of their African heritage, the exigencies of human bondage, and the interactions of Blacks with other ethnic groups.

Over more than 475 years since their initial arrival in the New World, Blacks have developed a wide range of alternative functional institutions and life-styles. These are still emerging, are continually evolving and are being revitalized by the persistence of many of the societal forces that

stimulated their original inception. At the same time, while Blacks have been trying to become an integral part of the whole American life, many have been unable to penetrate the innermost part of some institutions and have been forced to live apart from the dominant group in America (Gay, 1977).

These culutural components are organized into somewhat differing holistic constructs or cultural entities across socio-economic and regional lines within the United States. Granted, different operational details and behavioral variations exist among Black Americans, but this does not invalidate the existence of an underlying unanimity of basic cultural components which grew out of an essential core of consensus of shared experiences.

To fully comprehend the essence of Blacks' presence in the history and culture of the United States,we need to examine the results of the pull of the integrative forces and the push of the segregative forces operating upon Black Americans (Gay, 1977). Then, and only then, can we begin to understand the diversity and similarities of Black Americans within the context of the ethnic and cultural plurality of the United States. Possibly,we can also better understand the variation in degrees of acculturation and assimilation among Blacks in the United States. However, these concerns will not be covered within the context of this paper but the writer certainly encourages scholarly investigation to provide a better perspective on this situation.

## A DISTINCTIVE CULTURAL SYSTEM

The durability and viability of Black American culture as a functional alternative cultural entity have been questioned incessantly since the time of its inception. The skeptics variously contend that Black life-styles are merely inadequate imitations of the dominant Anglo-American culture;

that what is called Black culture is in reality the cult of poverty; that Blacks are "purely" Americans since any remnants of African heritage were destroyed by the slavery experience; and that there is little hope for the long-range survival of any identifiable Black culture. They also maintain that since it grew out of reactions to social problems, once these problems are solved the foundation upon which Black culture is established will collapse.

Despite these arguments, Black American culture has existed as long as American culture. There is little reason to believe that the needs which promoted its creation and have fostered its continuation will cease to exist within the foreseeable future. This does not mean that changes in Black institutions and cultural processes will not occur. Assuredly, there will be modifications and adaptations in the future as in the past, as intercultural interaction, borrowing, and exchange between Black Americans and other culture and ethnic groups proliferate.

The most obvious reason why Black culture will continue as a viable life-style alternative is the fact that many Black Americans still do not have full access to mainstream institutions and cultural options. Constitutional amendments, civil rights legislation and judicial decisions have begun to open the social, economic and political channels to mainstream American institutions and reward systems long closed to Blacks. But, the promises of the American Dream are far from being completely fulfilled.

Negative attitudes and discriminatory practices excluding Blacks from full participation, or relegating them to peripheral positions in society still exist. Many Black Americans, from time to time, feel a compelling desire to "go home," to "return to their roots," to look inward for a momentary refuge and santuary from the pressures of living and functioning in an often hostile dominant society. Therein they can find the inspiration, the affirmation, the rejuvenation, the revitalization they need to validate their personal integrity

and sense of peoplehood. This need may very well be a human desire that is shared by all people who maintain strong ties with their original ethnic heritages (Gay, 1977).

Even middle-class Black Americans face this need to "go home." Most of them are only one or two generations removed from their "beginnings," many of which are grounded in poverty, Southern origins, and direct descendancy from slavery. To "go home" means visiting and relating to friends and relatives that are in a lower socio-economic class, are more isolated from interaction with mainstream society, and are more intimately enmeshed in practicing Black culture. To make these interactions most pleasant, rewarding and facilitative middle-class Blacks must be active biculturalists, who are capable of style-shifitng back and forth between their own personal, social and professional worlds and the worlds of their home folks. This inter-class (and frequently cross-regional) interaction among Black Americans is still another factor contributing to the perpetuation of Black culture. It also helps to explain the phenomena of "unity within diversity," variations and commonalities, and diversity and similarities among Black Americans.

The Black Cultural Revolution of the 1960's and the current emphases on multi-culturalism, cultural pluralism and the revitalization of ethnicity underway in the United States stimulate cultural consciousness and the maintenance of distinctive life-styles as legitimate options. Furthermore, the insidious racism embedded in the instituional structures of American society serve to consolidate the historical experiences of Black Americans and to continually activate the need for them to have functional cultural options and life-styles. Indeed, for both internal reasons stemming from within the community of Black Americans and for external reasons impinging upon them from outside the community, Black culture is alive and well (Gay, 1977).

Prior to examining implications of cultural differences on Black participation in vocational education, a brief overview on the status of Blacks in vocational education is given.

## STATUS OF BLACK PARTICIPATION IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

What is the current status of Blacks in vocational education? Are Blacks participating in the kinds of vocational education programs that will lead to skill training in demand occupations? Let us briefly examine present track records of Blacks in vocational education by providing answers to the following questions:

- What is the Black enrollment in Vocational Education?

The 1979 Office for Civil Rights (OCR) Survey reports black enrollment in vocational schools as

18.4% in comprehensive high schools
11.3% in postsecondary institutions, and
10.3% in area vocational centers.

The largest share of black enrollment is in Consumer and Homemaking and Occupational Home Economics which is why more Black females than Black males are in vocational education. The third highest proportion of Black enrollment is in Office Occupations. Agriculture and Technical areas had the smallest percentage of Black participation.

NOTE: Approximately 19.5 million students were enrolled in vocational education during the data reporting period for the OCR Survey (school year 1978-79).

- What Kind of Vocational Programs are Blacks Enrolled in?

Blacks are overrepresented in the lowest quality programs and courses that equip them with no labor market skills ow which train for low-wage, low-demand, dead-end jobs. Blacks are underrepresented in the high quality programs leading to more lucrative employment where there is definite labor market demand and upward job mobility.

This pervasive pattern is reflected in nationwide statistics for 11th and 12th grade vocational program enrollment in comprehensive high schools. Black students constitute 18.4% of the total, and the columns below show the percentage of black students in selected programs in which they are underrepresented and overrepresented.

| Underrepresented | | Overrepresented | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agriculture Production | 10.8% | Medical Lab Assistant | 44.0% |
| Medical Emergency Tech | 16.3% | Appliance Repair | 36.2% |
| Steno/Secretarial | 12.0% | Masonry | 55.0% |
| Electronic | 14.8% | Custodial Service | 35.7% |
| Welding | 13.7% | Quantity Foods | 35.2% |
| Auto Specialization | 12.7% | Textile Production | 64.3% |
| Machine Shop | 12.7% | Upholstering | 42.0% |

Blacks tend to be underrepresented in the more advanced courses in an occupational area. For example,

Steno/Secretarial is 12% Black
Clerk Typist is 18.5% Black

- What is the Black Participation in Other Vocational Programs?

Vocational schools, especially the best ones, offer programs which provide work in addition to classroom training. In cooperation with unions and employers, schools sponsor apprentice training programs. Cooperative vocational education programs provide on-the-job training which is related to classroom instruction. Part-time work, unrelated to classroom training, is classified work-study. Black participation in these three programs is shown in the table below.

| | Total% Black enroll. | Apprentice Programs | Coop Voc. Ed. | Work-study |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Comp. High Schools | 18.4% | 12.4% | 17.0% | 27.6% |
| Junior Colleges | 11.3 | 8.0 | 11.5 | 18.6 |
| Area Voc. Centers | 10.3 | 8.0 | 7.6 | 17.2 |

## SOME EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS----

Given the realities about the Black American heritage, the presence and influence of the Black experience in American history and culture discussed in this paper, several implications for vocational education are quite clear.

First of all, vocational educators need to develop more realistic attitudes toward cultural and ethnic diversity. They need to develop a better understanding of the Black culture, and a better understanding of the concept of culture on a broader context. A Black student entering a classroom, a shop, or a laboratory approaches the situation at best with a cautious inquisitiveness, wondering how hospitable the situation will be, or at worst, with a feeling of alienation or hostility reflecting a string of unhappy prior experiences. In the case of the former - an open, questioning posture - there is hope. If the teacher or shop supervisor is sensitive to the attitudes that could prevail and is willing to help the clients - students - over that first wall of suspicion, the door is open to a wide range of new experiences for both, for a receptivity to the teacher-learner situation at its best. One of the best kept secrets in all academe is how many students arrive at a firm conclusion in the first ten minutes of a student-teacher encounter on whether the teacher is on the side of students or not. And, in the case of a minority student there is, understandably, a higher degree of apprehension. A teacher, therefore, whose professional preparation was devoid of any introduction to this issue can do enoromous harm and miss countless fine opportunities. It is curious that today one can visit campuses such as Pennsylvania State, Ohio State, Rutgers, Michigan State and Illinois and find not one white student in vocational-technical education who is taking a course designed to acqauint

young professionals with the background, culture, history, and the literature of blacks. This is a safe statement and the fact that it is, is the clearest evidence that we regard the issue as chimerical, not real and permanent. These courses are available, but they are evidently not recommended and not subscribed to by white students (Proctor, 1981).

Black enrollees cannot feel comfortable and be successful in vocational education unless the vocational educator is sensitive to what is special about their background, values, culture patterns, and the immediate environmental influences presently impinging upon them.

Sensitivity to the needs of a minority group includes a realization of the fact that within the group itself, people are not alike. The tendency to think about any group of people in generalized characterizations or stereotypes must be challenged and tested against the reality of who individuals are.

Second, to teach Black students most effectively and implement respect for cultural diversity within the vocational education setting requires more than curricula changes. Many Black students bring expectations and orientations to the vocational education class which reflect their cultural conditioning. Frequently, these are not consistent with the institutional norms and expectations of the school. The potential, therefore, for conflict to materialize increases considerably when Black students and teachers do not share similar ethnic identities, cultural codes, value systems, and background experiences. Differing expectations can be seen in such areas as communication processes, behavioral patterns, non-verbal nuanaces, interpersonal interactional styles and attitudes toward education and schooling. Hence it is imperative that vocational educators understand the value systems, cultural codes, relational patterns and communication habits of Black and other ethnic minority students

as a prerequisite to more accurately interpret behavioral patterns and attitudes in the classroom and laboratory.

Third, vocational educators, curriculum specialists and program planners must realistically begin to design curricula, select instructional materials, and plan individual/group learning experiences for students which bring to bear principles, concepts, content and techniques of vocational and technical education upon the study of Black culture. Additionally, vocational educators also ought to examine Black cluture from the perspective of many different disciplines (e.g., social sciences, science, music, communications, and philosphy). Vocational educators should also search for examples of Black culture in action: to test the academic constructs and hypotheses regarding what constitutes Black culture and how it is manifested against actual data recorded from observations.

Fourth, in a real and profound sense, the needs of Blacks and other minorities, vis a vis vocational and technical education, will not be met if we assume a passive posture toward these students and take for granted that the worth of the programs will be obvious and that the relevance of such education is, prima facie, self-evident. According to Proctor (1981), such technical training is still regarded as a last resort for those who fall exhausted and defeated in pursuit of other goals. The absence of technical training is one of the most expensive and debilitating aspects of minority advancement.

Fifth, vocational education must begin to join other disciplines in recognizing events and rituals considered important to Black students (e.g., Martin Luther King's birthday) while consistently celebrating events considered important by other students (e.g., George Washington's birthday).

Sixth, the vocational education profession should provide literature or training manuals depicting successful Black models.

Seventh, vocational educators should establish channels for relevant program input by Black enrollees and members of the Black community to facilitate the design, implementation and evaluation of vocational programs.

These few "educational implications" of the impact of Black culture are by no means exhaustive. They can be easily applied to other culturally different groups participating in vocational education. Also, they are merely indicators of the kind of questions that vocational educators should be seeking answers to in attempt to increase the participation and performance of Black students in across-the-board vocational programs so designed as to demonstrate respect for cultural diversity.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Several studies in the past have questioned the existence of cultural of language characteristics related to education which distinguish blacks from members of the dominant culture. There have been some interesting conclusions drawn from such studies. For example, the Olympus Research Corporation (1973) concluded that:

> ...There do not appear to be any cultural or language variables that substantially affect their level of performance in training or thier vocational outlook....

Furthermore, the study suggests that language is no real barrier in vocational training programs and that the few distinguishing characteristics that differentiate blacks from members of the dominant culture were judged either to have no particular effect on training or to be other than cultural or linguistic in origins. While the study admits the existence of cultural differences among some Blacks, it very seriously questions the existence of a completely

separate Black culture among the majority of Blacks in the United States. The following statements was given:

> ...Much of the customs, habits and socio-economic values of the United States are also the values of the Blacks....

My own experience and some of the literature surveyed would seem to challenge this conclusion. Yet, this does seem to point out the necessity for greater research and greater insight into the Black experience and vocational education. While this writer still would solidly argue the importance of understanding the impact of cultural and linguistic variables in vocational training programs, support is given, as revealed from practically all the data sources in the Olympus study, that cultural and linguistic concerns may be the most insignificant aspect of the problems of Blacks in a vocational training program; that is, insignificant in relation to political factors, discrimination and socio-economic deprivation which must be understood also. However, to completely ignore the impact of cultural and linguistic variables on the success of Blacks in vocational education would be a gross error.

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